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Meritorious advisor: Jessica Hennessey

Furman University

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Meritorious advisor: Jessica Hennessey

A Q&A with the assistant professor of economics, a recipient of the 2012 Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Advising.

Hometown: “My dad was in the Air Force, so I never had one.”

Degrees: Carleton College (undergraduate), University of Maryland (Ph.D.)

Arrived at Furman: 2009

Some might call your alma mater, Carleton, the Furman of Minnesota. How do the schools compare?

The difference in weather is probably the most striking. While I miss having an outdoor ice skating rink in the middle of campus, I really enjoy sun and warmer winters here! Carleton and Furman are similar when it comes to what I consider the important characteristics of a college: small, engaging classes, meaningful student-faculty interactions, and a sense of community.

What’s the best piece of advice you ever received?

Don’t be afraid to admit that you don’t know something. Someone told me this as I was preparing for my first formal interviews as a senior in college. If you don’t know something, then that opens the door to learning more. That’s when having a liberal arts background — being able to ask good questions, to be resourceful — has value.

As a student, did you have an advisor who was especially effective?

Two faculty members at Carleton played important advising roles in my life. One was my formal academic advisor, the other a faculty member with whom I developed a connection over the years. The most important thing I learned from them was to have confidence in my own decision-making; to do my research, ask good questions, and then rely on my instincts. As long as you do that it’s hard to make a bad decision. Now I recognize other lessons they taught me, and I appreciate that the advising relationship doesn’t end when students graduate. This is why it was important for me to come to a smaller school — I wanted to find a place that valued building those lasting connections.

You worked for several years with Lexecon, an economic consulting firm, before entering graduate school. How does this experience inform your teaching and advising?

Lexecon provides expert witness testimony on a variety of legal cases. The work is directly related to topics we discuss in class. I refer to pricing cases when talking about oligopolies and talk about how we tested for discrimination in lending practices when we review binary dependent variable regression models. While it’s interesting to bring this real world experience to classes, I think it has been equally valuable to draw on my private sector experience when talking with students about what they can do with an economics major. I can also talk about the application and interview experience — from both sides.

If you hadn’t gone into academia, what other career might you have pursued?

One of the things I loved while working at Lexecon was working with large datasets. It sounds nerdy, but I had fun programming and solving data puzzles. I think I would have continued in this area, whether it was working on policy research or for a private firm.

Excerpt from a letter nominating Jessica Hennessey for the award:

“Beyond her office hours with student advisees, Dr. Hennessey does everything she can to help and assist students in making their time at Furman as meaningful as it can be, with her end goal that they be as successful as possible after graduation. She transcends all roles as a mentor to any Furman student who crosses her path.”